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ABSTRACT

In designing and implementing a program to meet the educational and vocational needs of mentally retarded adults, the role of client involvement in curriculum decision-making was recognized. Two groups of clients were formed to provide input to staff. The Student Government of Continuing Education and the Worker Relations Council afforded clients opportunities to have a direct impact on quality of services. Clients learned important skills in responsibility, judgement, and accountability. A total of 48 clients have attended at least one meeting, representing approximately 12% of the facility's population. Subjects addressed by the committees are described, including repair of the facility gymnasium and job-related issues. (Author/CL)

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CLIENT GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

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ABSTRACT

In designing and implementing a program to meet the educational and vocational needs of mentally retarded adults, the role of client involvement in curriculum decision-making was recognized. Two groups of clients were formed to provide input to staff. The Student Government of Continuing Education and the Worker Relations Council afforded clients opportunities to have a direct impact on quality of services. Clients learned important skills in responsibility, judgement, and accountability.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Provisions for client self-direction and decision-making are important aspects of adult educational and vocational programs. Whenever a program is designed and implemented, these concepts should be included. The Student Government and the Worker Relations Council were developed as ways to involve clients in program design and as tools to train clients about the concepts of self-governance, self-direction, and personal decision-making.

Wolfensberger(1972) speaks of self government as a process with which mentally retarded adults can learn to shape their future and present circumstances. Heller(1978) felt that group discussion and decision-making were beneficial to the learning process of the mentally retarded participants.

The development of a group that would provide self-direction and interpersonal involvement was paramount to the philosophy of the continuing education program. The practice of having a student government in a school system has been used for years. In the late sixties, the practice of having students provide educators with input on education programs was widespread. Furth and Wachs(1975) illustrate, in their book on Piagetian practice in schools, how self-governance can be integrated in elementary education to foster social thinking (group decision making).

Houchin, Greiner, and Piechota(1984) show that a student

government for continuing education provides the individuals in the program with opportunities to:

1. be a social being through interactions with other persons;

2. expand knowledge through the interactive process of listening to other peoples' ideas and experiences;

3. through group process, learn to make decisions that affect present and future;

4. expand personal ability to make decisions by participating in the group as well as through the expanded skills obtained.

For the purpose of defining and measuring this program model, we have postulated a correlation of voluntary program attendance and decision-making, i.e., decision-making will be indicated through fluctuations in program attendance. Attending the program indicates a conscious decision. Thus an change in attendance would indicate, as a positive response, the effectiveness of the program's teaching of decision-making.

The purpose of the student government is to teach clients about the processes in which people can and do make changes. The student government provides a forum where the individual client can learn about informed decision-making and self-identification of needs and interests. It also provides clients with the understanding that there are individual and there are group decisions, each having its effect on the self-direction of the individual.

With this in mind, the continuing education student government was assigned the following tasks:

1. establish a functioning governing body consisting of membership, constitution and by-laws;

2. provide the staff of the continuing education program with input on the types of classes they wanted to have as their curriculum;

3. provide a vehicle to have clients learn, in a group environment, the processes of decison-making, with the purpose of the client using these techniques in his/her own self-direction;

4. provide a peer support mechanism for the discussion of issues about the services being received.

The student government provides a mechanism for clients to learn the skills they need to have to make personal choices. These skills include:

1. awareness of choice (options);

2. utilizing the process of choice;

3. basic judgement;

4. ramifications of the choice;

5. accountability for the decision (learn from past choices both right and wrong).

The more options available, and the greater the awareness of these options, the more people can make decisions.

Self-determination and decision-making were introduced in a second context, the Worker Relations Council. This

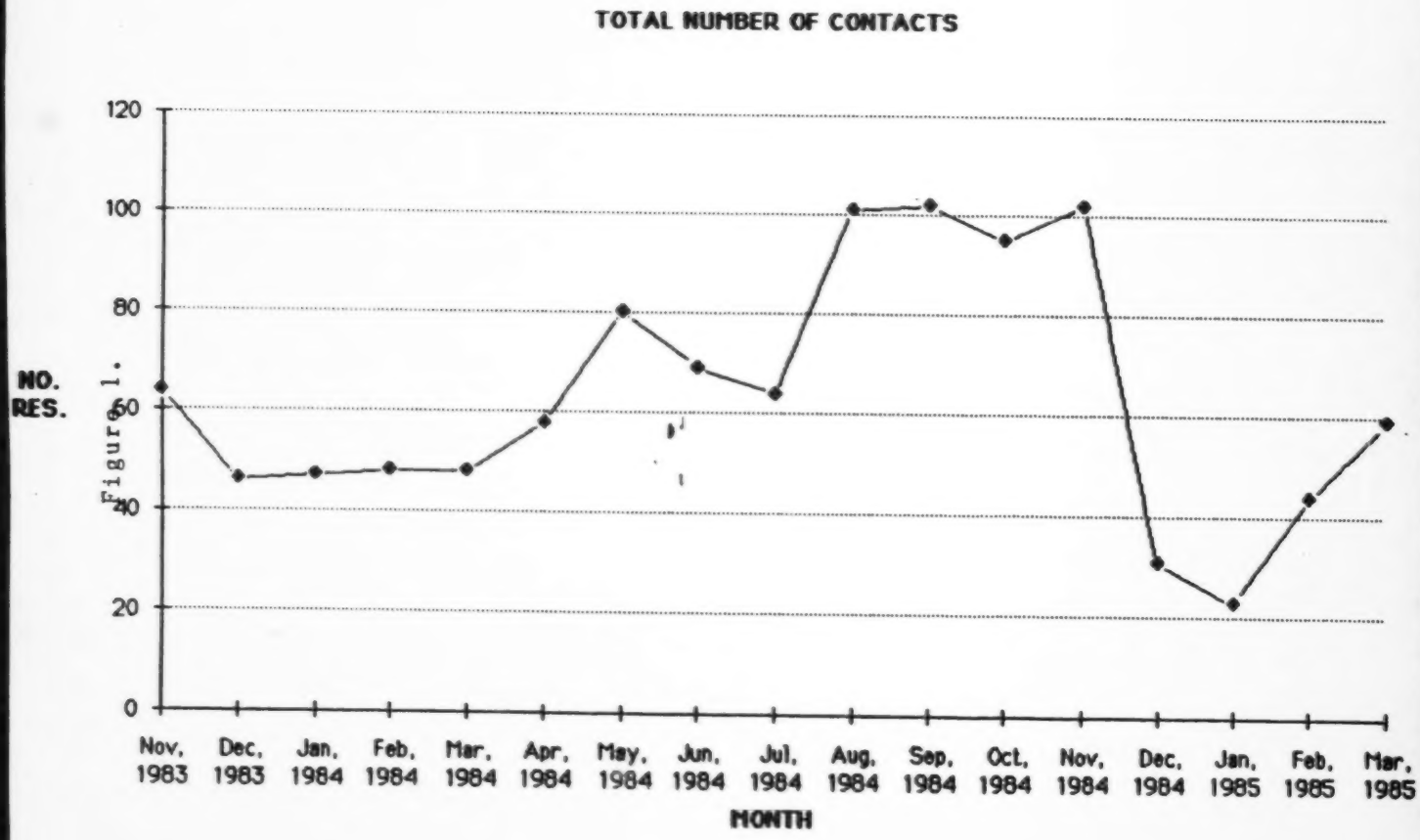
group's responsibility is to provide direct input to the Program Director, reflecting what clients feel are issues, e.g., work areas, work conditions, and types of employment. The council utilizes a different approach of self determination, as compared with the Student Government, in that it has a representative component. It is the responsibility of the representative to bring clients' issues to the council and to take back information. The council meets on a weekly basis to discuss issues and concerns. These concerns are forwarded by the group through the staff adviser to the Director for action or response.

The Worker Relations Council, as the Student Government, provides the client with a forum to learn what it is to be self-governing. By that process, the individual sees that his/her input and comments have an impact on what happens to him/her.

IMPLEMENTATION

The process of identifying those who might want to attend Student Government meetings involved discussions with a number of clients as well as a review of individuals based on the experience of the continuing education teachers. The process was helped by the particular enthusiasm of one client, who actively encouraged others' involvement. This person recognized the need for his peers to become actively involved in making decisions that affect their lives.

At first a small number of clients were involved. Over the full period attendance has grown from 14 different people each month to as high as 43 different people each month. A grand total of 48 clients have attended at least one meeting. This represents approximately 12% of the facility's population. Over the same period the average attendance per meeting has ranged from 10 to 26. (See Figures 1, 2, and 3.)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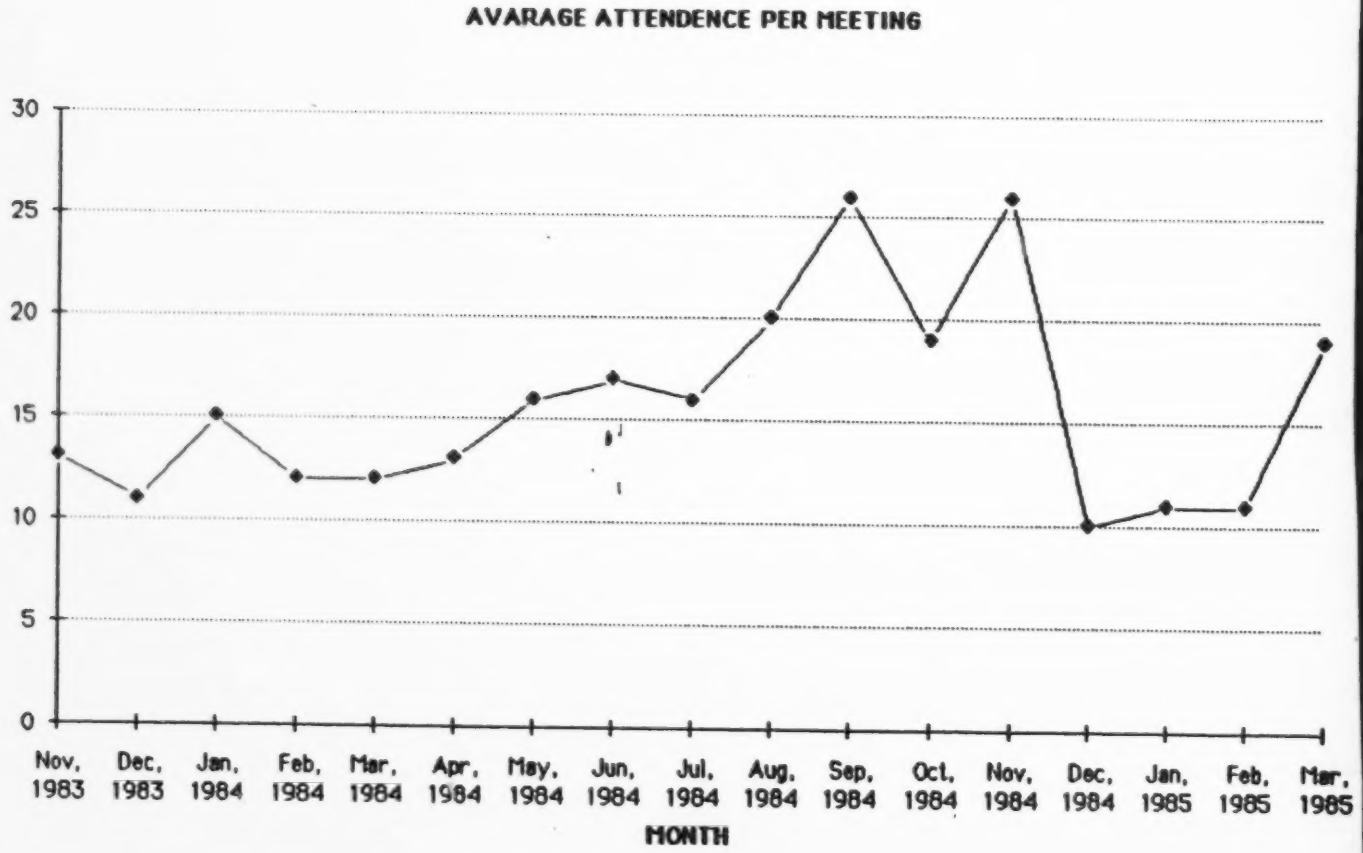
100
80
60
40
20
0
Nov, 1983
Dec, 1983
Jan, 1984
Feb, 1984
Mar, 1984
Apr, 1984
May, 1984
Jun, 1984
Jul, 1984
Aug, 1984
Sep, 1984
Oct, 1984
Nov, 1984
Dec, 1984
Jan, 1985
Feb, 1985
Mar, 1985
MONTH

Figure 1.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10
5
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Dec, 1983
Jan, 1984
Feb, 1984
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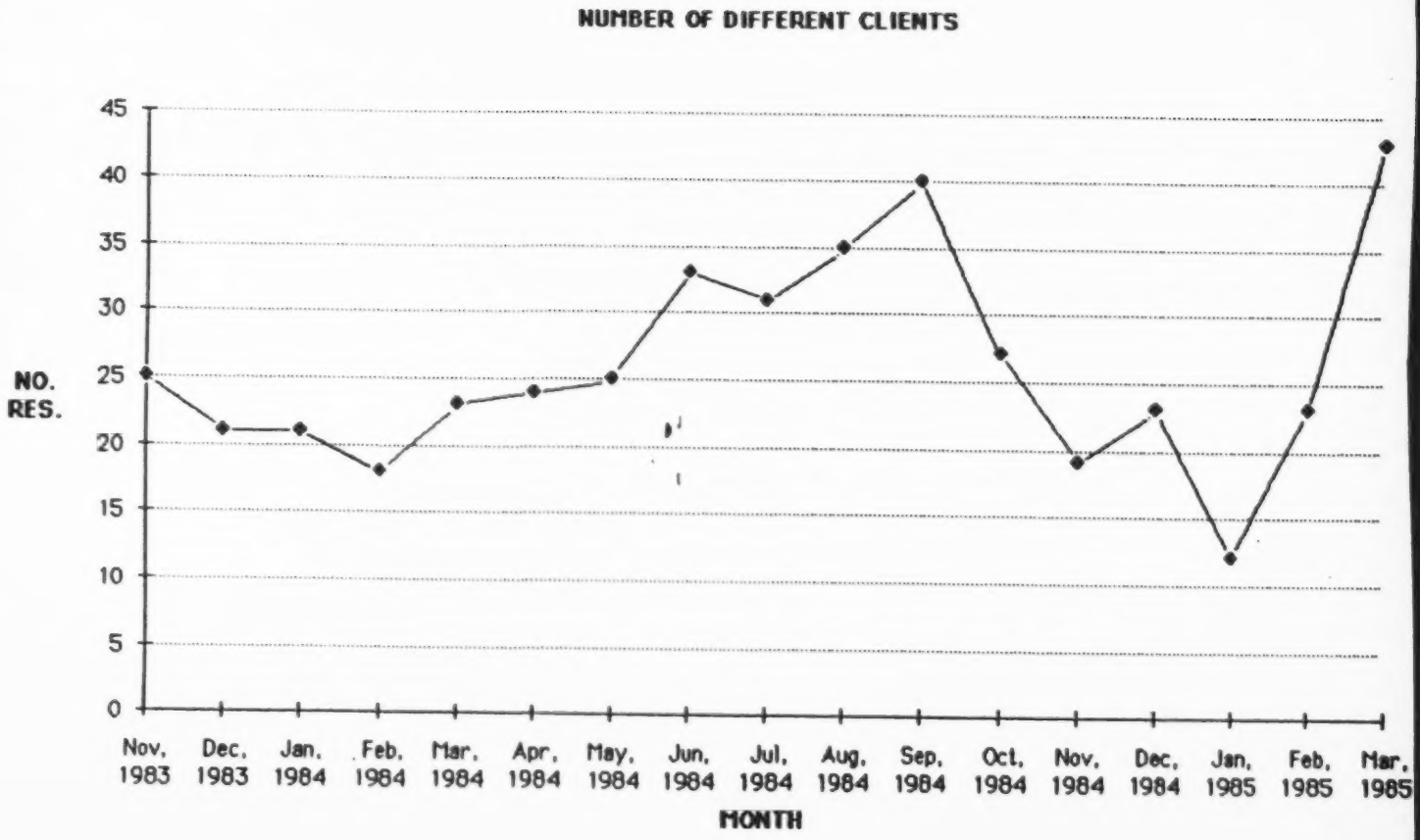
Apr, 1984
May, 1984
Jun, 1984
Jul, 1984
Aug, 1984
Sep, 1984
Oct, 1984
Nov, 1984
Dec, 1984
Jan, 1985
Feb, 1985
Mar, 1985
MONTH

Figure 2.

Figure 3.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Nov, 1983
Dec, 1983
Jan, 1984
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Mar, 1984
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Jun, 1984
Jul, 1984
Aug, 1984
Sep, 1984
Oct, 1984
Nov, 1984
Dec, 1984
Jan, 1985
Feb, 1985
Mar, 1985
MONTH

A significant stimulus for attending was the formation, by clients, of a committee three weeks after the first Student Government meeting. The purpose of the committee was to investigate the feasibility of taking action to have the facility's gymnasium repaired. The problem was buckling of floor tiles each summer, which made the gym unsafe. The Gym Floor committee began by writing letters to the Acting Superintendent and to Support Services staff.

After meeting with the Acting Superintendent it was learned that three options were available. The first was a complete rebuilding of the floor, the money for which would have to be approved by the state legislature. The second option involved use of the local town facilities, e.g., the town's recreation building. The third option involved the facility maintenance crew making temporary repairs to the floor. Although no one of these options excluded the others, they did represent significant differences in timing. Student Government supported all three options, specifically requesting that the Acting Superintendent take steps to initiate the temporary repairs. In the meantime, a representative of Student Government met with the Executive Secretary of the town to make arrangements for recreational use of the Town Hall. During the summer the Town Hall was used regularly by Continuing Education clients. In the Fall the gym floor was repaired.

During this period Student Government was not exclusively involved with the gym floor project. In early

summer some members attended a meeting with Stanley Herr. At this meeting self-advocacy resources were discussed. As a direct result of meeting with Dr. Herr, Student Government made contact with the Resident Government in Syracuse, N.Y. This provided impetus for defining the government organization more, e.g., by drawing up by-laws and by electing officers.

Clients became concerned with a new statute that would allow the state to charge them for room and board. In a meeting with a representative from the Legal Office and with the Human Rights Officer, the implications of this statute were discussed. Also during this time a discussion was held on the subject of previous educational experiences. To this point many Student Government members had been resistant to committing themselves to participating in Continuing Education classes, or to developing new classes. During the discussion a number of clients spoke up to say they felt they had been to school enough when they were younger. Some others expressed interest in learning new subjects, but were not able to provide ideas as to what they wanted to learn about, except in response to suggestions by the advisor.

Although the gym floor project had proven to be highly motivating to clients, and gave teachers an opportunity to work on such academic skills as reading, writing, and mathematics, through letter-writing and calculation of projected costs; and although the project was a source of growing identity and self-esteem for members, there had been

little or no response to suggestions for further study, or electives. Since the purpose of Student Government was to allow clients to make choices about the content of their education, Continuing Education teachers needed to develop a new strategy.

Analysis of the problem suggested that it stemmed from a lack of exposure. Clients were able to make choices; only they had little idea what activities could be chosen between. From this point, the activities of Student Government were directed toward exploration.

A movie series was designed to orient clients to a variety of social settings and cultures. Meeting time was allocated for the planning of field trips, for example to the Science Museum in the state capital. Clients were asked to set goals, make plans, and follow through. Discussion time included exploration of personal feelings to help clients identify likes and dislikes. Lessons were presented on subjects of interest to clients, such as work roles and geography.

During the early Government meetings clients were typically reluctant to speak, preferring that the adviser take the lead. During discussions with clients regarding education it was discovered that not only were clients generally unaware of the educational options available to them but they also were reluctant to make choices when presented with options. When asked questions which required a decision to be made (e.g., about educational needs,

interests, feelings) most clients looked around the room waiting for others to answer or stated that they didn't know the answer. When some clients took a position they sought approval of that position by staff or by peers. If they sensed disapproval by others they immediately backed down from their position.

To help clients develop a positive sense of themselves some meetings were spent discussing feelings, e.g., "how do you feel when people tell you what to do?"; "name something you like about yourself"; "tell us something good that happened to you today." These discussions led to increased participation by clients and seemed to contribute to the development of positive self-image. The discussions also helped to establish a feeling of trust and acceptance between members as well as between members and the adviser. Once clients began to identify their feelings, and to do so without fear of rejection by peers or staff, they were better able to make choices when presented with options with which they were familiar.

As stated earlier, clients were not aware at the outset of the educational options available to them. Therefore the question, "what would you like to learn about?" was too broad and open-ended. When presented with options clients had difficulties making choices because they didn't know enough about the options presented. The Student Government decided that everyone could learn more about mathematics and language. These were subjects that clients were familiar with

and were the first classes to be held. However, when science was discussed as a possible subject, it was decided by clients that they would visit science museums to find out more. As a result of these visits clients decided they would like a movie series about nature. When this series proved to be successful the decision to add science to the continuing education curriculum was made by clients. In addition to science, clients opted to have classes on the Individual Service Plan, presidential elections, savings accounts and trust funds, foreign countries, responsibilities of student government officers, personal development and sexuality, photography, civil rights and music. The decision to offer these courses was a result of discussion about and exposure to the subjects during meeting time.

At first, clients did not always follow through on the educational options they chose. It is difficult to determine why the clients who decided they would like to learn more about a chosen subject did not participate in the classes once they were offered. Most clients were evasive when asked why they didn't attend. Some possible reasons are:

> clients didn't really want to learn about the chosen subject;
> they were testing to see if education staff would indeed follow through on their selection;
> they decided to attend other activities held on the same night;

> a decision by one or two 'leaders' not to attend may have influenced their peers to do the same;

> that clients lacked the self-confidence needed to participate.

Regardless of the reason for any one person, it shows that both group and individual decision-making processes were occuring.

As a parallel process to the student government, the Worker Relations Council explores job related issues. The initial process of this group was to elect representatives: the council officials. each vocational program had a meeting in which the workers elected their representative to the council. Then there was a general meeting of workers which included nominations for officers. A two week period was set aside for campaigning. On the day of the election there was another general meeting of the workers. A vote was taken.

The group began slowly due to a change of the staff adviser. Once there was a stable staff situation, the group began to develop its agenda. The Director of the day programs was one of the first staff requested to appear at the meetings. Workers wanted to know what impact their recommendations would have on the work program. They were told that we would seek their input on programs as well as their direct input in developing worker protocol. They were also told that if they had any issues or grievances, the group could be their mechanism to bring them to the Director.

After the next meeting the Director received a request

that a soda machine and a telephone be placed in the industrial center. Both of these requests were honored.

The Worker Relations Council is now developing rules for the workers, to address both benefits and policies. The group is looking at issues of sick time and vacation time, as well as a process for disciplinary action.

The actions of the Worker Relations Council indicate client initiative, decision-making, and followthrough. Through the Council, and the Student Government, clients have successfully held staff accountable.

At present clients are at various stages in their ability to make decisions. Some continue to rely on others to make choices for them or are very hesitant about doing so independently. However, others are beginning to make choices for themselves and are speaking up when a decision is made for them by staff. Some have chosen to be involved in generic continuing education programs and competitive employment.

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